

Book reviews

Children of Choice: Freedom and the New Reproductive Technologies

John A Robertson, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, 201 pages, £23.50, US \$29.95.

The scope of reproductive choices has never been greater. The range of contraceptive devices is constantly growing. Technology continues to improve methods of conception for the infertile. Yet at the same time there are examples of individuals' reproductive choice being subject to worrying constraints. For instance, in the USA women receiving welfare benefits in certain states were told that they must have the contraceptive device Norplant inserted to protect them against conception because of the consequent cost of conception to the state.

The scientific advances of the last two decades have provided much fodder for academic debate in the area of reproductive technologies. In *Children of Choice* Professor Robertson provides a framework for the analysis of such technologies. He takes as the basis for his discussion a concept he calls "procreative liberty". Procreative liberty is the freedom to choose whether or not to have offspring and to control the use of one's reproductive capacity. Robertson states that this liberty does not imply that there is a duty upon others to provide resources to facilitate that liberty. Rather, it simply requires others to refrain from interference with its exercise. For example, it entitles an individual to receive protection from coercive state measures. He argues that procreative liberty should be protected unless it can be shown that "tangible harm" will be caused to the interests of others.

While many of the issues examined in this book, such as abortion and

assisted reproduction, have been discussed, often extensively, elsewhere in the past, Robertson's text is particularly interesting in that he informs his discussion with reference to recent developments and new technologies. For example, he considers the implications of genetic screening and genetic manipulation. Procreative liberty, he suggests, entitles couples to use screening techniques to select embryos prior to implantation. A further element of this liberty is that individuals should be able to reject the use of technologies such as genetic diagnosis when making choices around conception. Procreative liberty also gives a couple the right to control the disposition of embryos created during the process of infertility treatment. His proposition that procreative liberty also means that there are obligations to ensure consumer safety in the area of the provision of new reproductive technologies may be seen as questionable, if procreative liberty is seen as a negative right.

Arguably one of the most controversial parts of Robertson's text involves discussion of those situations in which he believes that imposition of constraints upon procreative liberty are justifiable. For example, he suggests that a woman may be morally obligated to behave in a certain manner during pregnancy. While he believes that observation of practices such as a healthy diet should generally be the subject of encouragement during pregnancy, he suggests that in some situations it may be legitimate to use coercive measures, including criminal sanctions, to govern a pregnant woman's behaviour. Nevertheless he does recognise that the costs and benefits of such sanctions should be tested empirically.

In his penultimate chapter "Farming the uterus", Robertson considers the implications of his thesis in relation to the use of reproductive capacity for purposes other than reproduction, such as the production

of embryos for research and production of fetal tissue.

The argument from a rights-based procreative liberty is unlikely to be accepted by all. Robertson, in his final chapter, anticipates certain objections which may be advanced to this approach from, for example, a feminist perspective and a communitarian critique. Does he convince? Nearly but not totally. The limits upon procreative liberty require, I would suggest, greater clarification. His arguments for the concept of procreative liberty are unlikely to disarm a feminist critique where fundamental differences of approach are likely to persist.

Children of Choice is a bold book, providing a scholarly analysis combined with an account which is accessible and interesting. It should provide the basis of much stimulating debate in this area.

J V McHALE
Lecturer in Law,
Faculty of Law,

University of Manchester

Humane Medicine

Miles Little, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1995, xi and 195 pages, £12.95. sc, £27.50 hc.

Do not be put off, as I was, by the title, whose adjective cloaks a possible confusion between general benevolence, and that illumination which comes from study of the arts – both of which are commended in the text, one by implication, the other by the specific suggestion that both admission to medical school and the subsequent medical curriculum should place greater emphasis on linguistic skills. And there is the further question, "To what (other than bad medicine) might "humane medicine" be antithetical?"